



Oregon  
Shakespeare  
Festival.

# 2019 Study Guide



James IV of Scotland, I  
of England and Ireland.

## KING JAMES I AND WITCHES

It is believed that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* for his new king and patron, King James I. King James was fascinated with witches — perhaps because of the bloody death of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, by the ax at the command of Elizabeth I.

- King James I told others that his mother's death was visible to those who see the future, in Scotland before it happened.
- When he sailed to Denmark to bring back his betrothed, Anne, the return voyage was so plagued by storms that one ship in the royal fleet was lost. James blamed witches.
- Upon landing in England, he had up to 70 “witches” rounded up, and under torture, they confessed and were put to death.
- James went on to write *Daemonologie*, a treatise on killing witches.
- Upon becoming King of England, he made the statutes against witchcraft more strict, ensuring a rise in the death toll of those convicted of witchcraft.
- The apparition shown to Macbeth of Banquo with the glass in his hand represents the line of kings that spring from Banquo. The real Banquo was an accomplice in the death of Duncan, but King James was thought to be a descendant of Banquo's, so Shakespeare may have changed the nature of his Banquo character to please the king.

# Macbeth

by William Shakespeare



*The Weird Sisters* by Johann Heinrich Füssli.

## HISTORICAL FIGURES

There are several historical figures and events that may have influenced Shakespeare in writing *Macbeth*. They are:

- King Duncan in *Macbeth* is a wise, older man but historically was a terrible king who ruled from 1034 to 40 and was probably about 39 when he died. Macbeth, Chief of the Northern Scots, had a strong claim to the throne through his mother's line. He defeated and killed Duncan in 1040.
- Macbeth married Gruoch, who was of royal blood, being a descendant of a Scottish king herself.
- After killing King Duncan, Macbeth became king, and he and Gruoch ruled for 17 years.
- A 10th-century King of Scotland, Duffe, was murdered by Donwalde at the urging of Donwalde's wife. Donwalde got Duffe's attendants drunk and murdered Duffe in their absence.



The Cobbe portrait of William Shakespeare.

## SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY

- Written around 1606 and most likely first performed for King James I.
- King James did not like long plays; this perhaps accounts for the play's short length. It is Shakespeare's shortest tragedy.
- The source material is *The Chronicles of Holinshed* by Raphael Holinshed, and the reigns of Duncan and Macbeth of Scotland (1034–57).
- *Macbeth* was first performed at court for King James, Queen Anne and her visiting brother from Denmark.

*What's done cannot be undone.*

—Lady Macbeth, Act V, scene 1

## Before seeing/reading the play

1. Define ambition. What are the benefits of ambition (that is, how does ambition help a person achieve goals?) What are the dangers? What are people ambitious for? What price might people be willing to pay to achieve their ambitions? What might they be willing to sacrifice? How far might people be willing to go to achieve their ambitions?

2. Define conscience. Why is it important to listen to one's conscience? What is the cost of going against one's better judgment?

3. Define fate. Define free will. In what ways is life governed by fate? In what ways is life governed by free will? In what ways can life be governed by both free will and fate?

4. What is equivocation? How can equivocation be used as a weapon?

5. Read Act I, scene i. What information do the three witches give us? What disturbances in nature or the weather do they report? What opposites are mentioned in the scene? What do you expect from the play based on the first scene?

6. Research the history behind the story of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. In what ways is the story of *Macbeth* a family drama as well as a political drama? These and other websites provide information:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/macbeth.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/macbeth.shtml)

<http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/Scotland-History/DuncanandMacbeth.htm>

7. Research the views on witchcraft, magic and superstition held by people in Shakespeare's day. How do you think these views influenced the play? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-witchcraft-and-witches.htm>

<https://www.historyextra.com/period/stuart/shakespeares-macbeth-and-king-james-witch-hunts/>

8. What is a Thane? What power did that title hold? What was the traditional way for the next king to be chosen in Medieval Scotland? This and other websites provide information:

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/thane>

<http://www2.cedarcrest.edu/academic/eng/flfletcher/macbeth/papers/atillett.htm>

9. What were the responsibilities and expectations of a host toward his/her guests in medieval Scotland? What were the responsibilities and expectations of a kinsman toward his/her relatives? What were the responsibilities and expectations of a subject toward his/her king? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.deadblack.net/samhain/laws.html>

<http://www.carmentablog.com/2016/02/23/xenia-laws-of-hospitality-in-different-cultures/>



2019 costume rendering for Lady Macbeth  
by Chrisi Karvonides-Dushenko.

10. What are the qualities of a good king? What are the qualities of a tyrant? What are the qualities of a traitor?

11. What were the attitudes of the Elizabethans toward the Scottish? What was the history of the relationship between these two countries? What were the English perceptions of Scottish men? Scottish women? How did those attitudes change when James I became king? This and other websites provide information:  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/james\\_i\\_king.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/james_i_king.shtml)

12. King James I was the patron of Shakespeare's company, which was known as the King's Men. Why might Shakespeare have felt motivated to make sure *Macbeth* pleased his patron, who was also his king? How might the writing of the play have been influenced by the interests of King James I? By his nationality? Which passages in the play seem intended to please him? Which might have displeased him? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A4455434>

<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/faq/macbethfaq.html>

13. What superstitions are connected with the play *Macbeth*? What are the traditional methods of counteracting the "curse" on the play? This and other websites provide information:

<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid%3A78882>

## RESOURCES

### Films:

*Macbeth*, with Orson Welles, 1948

*Macbeth*, with Ian McKellen and Judi Dench, 1978

*Macbeth*, with Antony Sher, 2001

*Macbeth*, with Patrick Stewart, 2010

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>

## After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your observations about the first scene of the play: What opposites do the witches mention? What do these opposing words and ideas reveal about the world of the play?

2. Refer to your discussion about equivocation. What role does equivocation play in *Macbeth*? Who equivocates and when? Who uses equivocation as a weapon and to what effect?

3. Read Act I, scene 3, the scene with Macbeth, Banquo and the witches. What do the witches prophesy for Macbeth? For Banquo? How does Macbeth react to the prophecies? How does Banquo react? What is the difference between Banquo's response to the prophecies and Macbeth's? How does this difference continue to manifest throughout the play?

4. Why does Macbeth think the prophecies about him are destined to come true, but the prophecies about Banquo can be avoided? If Macbeth believes these prophecies are destined to come true, why doesn't he just let the future unfold? How does Lady Macbeth influence Macbeth's decisions? Is Macbeth a victim of fate, or does he have free will to choose the outcome?

5. How is Macbeth described by others at the beginning of the play? What do these early descriptions say about Macbeth? How is Macbeth described by others as the play progresses? By the play's end? What do these descriptions say about how he changes? What do these descriptions say about his kingship?

6. Why do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth want to rule Scotland?

7. Lady Macbeth advises Macbeth to "look like the innocent flower/ but be the serpent under it." How is the idea that reality can be hidden by appearances explored in the play? Who is deceived by appearances and when? Who deceives by appearing to be something they are not?

8. Refer to your research regarding the responsibilities and expectations of a host toward their guests in medieval Scotland. How do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth fulfill these responsibilities and expectations? How do they violate them?

9. Refer to your discussion of ambition. What price do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth pay for their ambitions?

10. What are Macbeth's faults and character flaws? In what ways is he a hero with a tragic flaw? In what ways is he a villain? What are Lady Macbeth's faults and character flaws? In what ways is she a hero with a tragic flaw? In what ways is she a villain? What is the difference between villains and heroes, and how do they blend into each other in the characters of Lord and Lady Macbeth?

11. Why doesn't Macbeth stop killing after he has killed Duncan? Why does every single death seem necessary to Macbeth? How does one act of evil or violence seem to demand another? At what point could Macbeth have changed the path he is going down? Why does he choose the path that he takes?

12. How does the society of *Macbeth* define what it is to be a man? How does Macbeth's view of manhood line up with Malcolm's? With Macduff's? With Lady Macbeth's? How does this society define what it is to be a woman? How does Lady Macbeth's view of being a woman line up with Macbeth's? How does her view of being a woman line up with the society in which she lives?

13. *Macbeth* contains three sets of fathers and sons: Duncan and Malcolm (and Donalbain), Banquo and Fleance, Macduff and his son. What do the fathers and sons have in common? How does each father treat his son? How does each son defend his father? Given this pattern in the play, what is the significance of the fact that Macbeth has no children?

14. Why does Macduff flee to England? What does he hope to accomplish there? Why does he leave his family behind? In what ways does he achieve his goals in England?

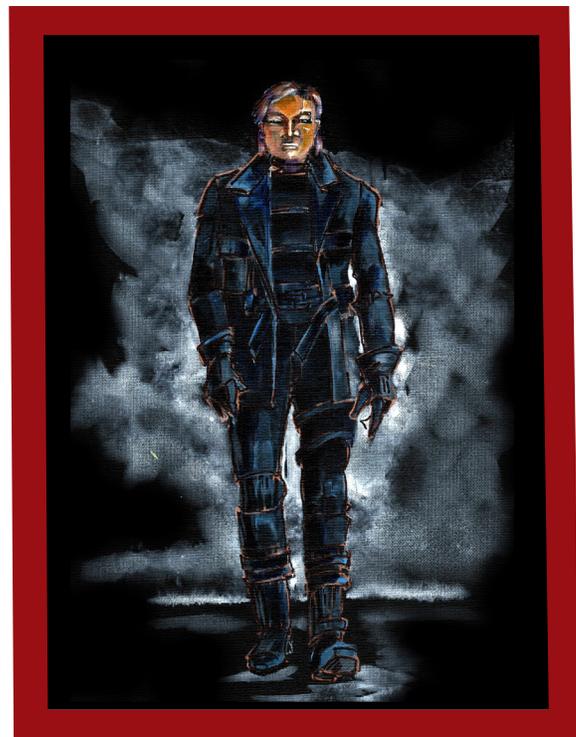
15. Why is Malcolm suspicious of Macduff? What does he suspect him of? How does he test Macduff? Why does he decide to trust him? What does this interaction tell you about Malcolm and his fitness to rule Scotland?

16. In Act IV, scene 3, Malcolm lists the "king becoming graces." Which of these graces does Duncan possess? Macbeth? Malcolm himself?

17. What role do supernatural events play in this production? What is the function of the witches? What effect did the witches have? What is the function of Banquo's ghost? What effect does Banquo's ghost have?

18. This production begins with the funeral of Lord and Lady Macbeth's child. How does this event set the tone for the rest of the play? What textual evidence supports this choice? Why is the death of their child significant to the rest of the play?

19. Refer to the discussion on tyranny. If you are seeing *Cambodian Rock Band*, compare and contrast the worlds that the Khmer Rouge and Macbeth create when they come into power. Compare and contrast the characters of Macbeth and Duch. In what ways are they similar? Different? What do both plays tell us about the possibility of tyranny?



2019 costume rendering for Macbeth by Chrisi Karvonides-Dushenko.

## IMAGERY IN MACBETH

According to Caroline F. E. Spurgeon in her book *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us*, the rich imagery in *Macbeth* follows four major ideas. Those ideas are:

1. The image of Macbeth as one whose new honors do not fit him, as if he wears a poorly fitting garment. For example: "The Thane of Cawdor lives; why do you dress me/In borrow'd robes?" Act I, scene 3, lines 108-109.
2. The image of sound echoing over vast regions, for example: "And pity, like a naked, new-born babe, /Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed /Upon the sightless couriers of the air, /Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye, /That tears shall drown the wind..." Act I, scene 7, lines 21-25.
3. Light stands for goodness and darkness for evil. Two good examples are: "...signs of nobleness, like stars shall shine/On all deservers." Act I, scene 4, lines 41-42. "Stars hide your fires; /Let not light see my black and deep desires." Act I, scene 4, lines 50-51.
4. Finally, that sin is a disease. An example is: "...make us medicines of our great revenge, / To cure this deadly grief..." Act IV, scene 3, lines 214-215.

Listen for these examples of imagery and others as you watch the play.

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Left: 2019 *Macbeth* set model. Designed by Christopher Acebo.

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